

Officials say report inaccurate

By ALLISON FARRELL - IR State Bureau - 1/30/04

HELENA — A nationally released analysis of public health care that faults Montana for freezing enrollment in its Children's Health Insurance Program is inaccurate and based on old data, state health officials said Thursday.

The Government Performance Project in Washington, D.C., funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, criticized Montana and four other states in their report for capping enrollment in their CHIP programs.

But the authors of the study didn't know that Gov. Judy Martz gave CHIP an additional \$609,000 in late October, eliminating Montana's 1,300-child waiting list.

"This report is not accurate right now," said Gail Gray, director of the Department of Public Health and Human Services. "We have zero children on the waiting list."

After learning about Martz's appropriation for CHIP, one of the authors of the report conceded that Montana's CHIP situation is not as dire as the report makes it out to be. The articles appear in the February 2004 issue of *Governing* magazine.

"If there's no one on the waiting list, we're very happy for the state," Katherine Barrett said from her New York City office Thursday. She co-wrote the 60-plus page report on health care in all 50 states.

Barrett said the report's authors did their research last summer and fall, and last minute fact-checking failed to turn up Montana's October expansion of CHIP.

But Barrett said Montana's CHIP program is not out of the woods yet. She said the state could face problems in the future when Martz's appropriation of one-time money runs out.

If the state doesn't find a way to pay for the additional children accommodated by Martz's \$609,000 gift, Montana will once again have to put children on waiting lists, Barrett said. And that means some children who are financially eligible for the program will be forced to wait until a slot opens up.

While CHIP doesn't have a waiting list now, the program is operating at capacity with approximately 10,700 children enrolled. Before Martz gave the \$609,000 to CHIP in October, some 9,500 children were served by CHIP and more than 1,000 were on the waiting list.

The authors of the study also criticized Montana for offering the most minimal Medicaid program allowed under federal law and said the state was never generous in its eligibility levels for CHIP.

Only nine states have a higher percentage of uninsured children, the study shows. Gray said she can't argue with those numbers. "I would agree that those programs are at the minimum levels," Gray said, adding that the state can't afford to expand eligibility. The report did praise Montana for undertaking a major redesign of its Medicaid program.

The analysis by Governing magazine of state-funded health care is part of the Government Performance Project's effort to evaluate a wide range of state government management and policy functions.

This year's special report focuses on six critical health care problems facing states: long-term care, public health, mental health, prescription drugs, access to care for the uninsured and care for children.

The Government Performance Project found and documented all 50 states' inability to fairly and consistently deliver improvements in medicine to many citizens.

Health care in most states is not just inadequate, the study concluded — it's deteriorating.

“After exhaustive analysis and hundreds of interviews, it became clear that there is a health care crisis in America,” said Peter Harkness, the magazine's publisher and editor. “But it is in no way a medical crisis. It is a fiscal crisis.”